

WHITE MISCHIEF WITH EDUCATION IN KENYA

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The notorious Kibera slums, on the outskirts of Nairobi, are home to an estimated 700,000 people and are recognised within the international research community as one of the largest 'informal settlements' in sub-Saharan Africa. Recent research by Professor James Tooley has uncovered a large number of private primary and secondary schools that have not previously been acknowledged.

A total of 76 private primary and secondary schools, enrolling 13,349 students, have been found with approximately one-third of the schools being managed by individual proprietors, and one-third each by religious organisations and community self-help groups. Monthly fees in primary schools typically range from Ks.50/- (£0.42) to Ks.500/- (£4.17), with the average being in the range Ks.169/- (£1.41) to Ks.256/- (£2.13) per month. The majority of the schools (57%) received no subsidy at all from outside, and were financed entirely out of fee income.

Professor Tooley's research project in Kenya is of particular interest as it has also found that the free primary education (FPE) policy introduced by the government in March 2003 may not have had the expected impact of increasing school enrolments. Instead it may have led to a *decrease* in the *numbers* of students enrolled in primary schools, and a *decrease* in *quality* in government schools, at least as perceived by parents. As FPE was funded in part by a \$50 million grant from the World Bank and \$20 million from the UK government, any lessons gleaned may be valuable to development agencies globally, as well as to the Kenyan government.

Enrolment in the five government schools located on the outskirts of Kibera have increased, but there has been a substantial decline in enrolment in the private schools and some private schools have ceased to function since FPE. In Kibera, for example, 33 private primary schools were found to have closed since FPE. In other words, FPE seems to have led to a substantial *crowding out* of the private sector. Combining estimates of the number of children previously in the now closed schools with the decline in enrolment in existing private schools, and setting this decline against the growth of enrolment in the government schools, there may be nearly 9,000 *fewer students from Kibera* alone now enrolled in school, as a direct consequence of FPE!

Even if these are over-estimates, the research suggests that the net impact of FPE would be simply a transfer of children from the private sector to the government sector, rather than a net increase in enrolment. This suggests the need for a radical reappraisal of the impact of FPE, which takes into account its effect on private schools serving low-income families, instead of, as seems to be the case officially, only looking at enrolment in government schools.

Some might argue that, if children have transferred from private to government schools, then this is a positive outcome, as private schools in the slum areas are frequently criticised as being of inadequate quality. However, when poor parents were asked about the relative quality of government and private schools, many said that they preferred the private schools, whatever their shortcomings. Key points emerging from these discussions included: government schools are too overcrowded, especially since FPE; there are high 'hidden costs' of government schools, that, for instance, insist poor parents meet all the formal uniform requirements before their children can be admitted – this is prohibitively expensive for poor parents; and the quality of teaching is higher in the private schools, partly because there has been a decline in teaching standards in government schools since the introduction of FPE. Teachers are more accountable to parents and head teachers in the private schools.

Professor Tooley's preliminary research findings support the notion that class sizes are much higher in the government than in the private schools – with teacher–pupil ratios of 1 : 23 and 1 : 57 respectively in private and government schools serving Kibera children. There are, of course, severe shortcomings in private school infrastructure, but this simply reflects the generally poor quality of buildings in the slum areas. Moreover, private schools are able to provide basic facilities such as blackboards, chairs and benches, toilets and drinking water, and teachers were usually teaching when they should be – unlike in the government schools.

By recognising the existence of a vibrant private sector for the poor, and working with it rather than against it, Kenya now has a unique opportunity to think the unthinkable and blaze new trails in their search for education for all.

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